

BODY LANGUAGE

Introduction

Body language is an important – and often decisive – factor in risk communication. This is especially true of communicators, who need to show congruency between the oral information and their body language when transmitting a message, because only if they manage to do so will the message be effective. Body language is an element in communication that we should be very much aware of because it gives clues to the character, emotions, and reactions of an individual.

Our state of mind is expressed in our body language. For example, if we doubt something we hear, we raise an eyebrow. If we feel puzzled, we scratch our nose. We cross our arms to isolate or protect ourselves. We shrug our shoulders to express indifference. We wink as a sign of intimacy. If we are impatient, we drum our fingers. We strike our forehead with our hand when we have forgotten something. We rock when we feel anxious, and we sway backwards and forwards on our feet when we are in a situation of conflict. An inexperienced speaker in an auditorium expresses his anxiety by moving from one side to another, staring at the ceiling, walking round in circles, or rubbing his hands together.

An awareness of body language is often the key to successful personal relationships and it can be the secret that enables so many people to manage others. Some individuals seem to have the knack of interpreting body language and manipulating people with their bodies as well as their voices. Knowledge of the body language of the other person and the ability to interpret it make a person aware of his or her own body language. This awareness, in turn, leads to greater self-control and more effective communication processes.

If you are aware of what you do with your body, your self-understanding becomes deeper and more meaningful. Once you manage to control your body language, you will be able to cross many defensive barriers and establish better relationships.

Body language is an important component of communication and it is to our advantage to develop skills in this area in order to be better risk communicators.

Definition

Body language is the language of gestures and postures. Studies of body language analyze the emotions transmitted through movement, such as facial expressions and the movement of eyes, hands, legs, feet, and the whole body. These studies show us how the body language of a person can reveal to us his or her state of mind and intentions, and personality traits such as self-confidence, shyness, aggressiveness, greed, rivalry. We can say that a person's posture expresses his or her attitudes and feelings.

The real value of body language is found in the sum of all the levels of communication: oral language, visual language, body language, and imagination.

Genetic and cultural roots

It is difficult to determine exactly how a communication system is inherited or learned. Darwin believed that facial expressions of emotion were the same in all human beings, regardless of their culture.

Today it is considered that within a specific culture there exists a general agreement to recognize the different emotional states. The human brain is programmed to raise the corners of the mouth when the individual feels happy and turn them down when he is discontent. Depending on the sensation that reaches the brain, a person will frown, raise his eyebrows, or raise one side of his mouth.

The work of different researchers has shown that we can inherit in our genetic makeup certain basic physical reactions. We are born with elements of a body language. We can make another human being aware of basic sensations of hate, fear, pleasure, or sadness, without ever having learned how to do so. This does not contradict the fact that we do also have to learn many gestures that mean one thing in one society and something else in another.

The sound signals innate in the human being remain valid and continue to play important roles. Unlike verbal signals, they arise spontaneously and mean the same in all cultures. Shouting, sobbing, laughing, roaring, moaning, and crying transmit messages to everyone everywhere. Like the sounds of other species, these signals are associated with basic emotional states and give an immediate impression of the state of the person making the sounds.

The human being has conserved his instinctive expressions: the smile, laugh, stare, frightened face, and solemn face are signals proper to the species. These signals are common to all societies and persist despite the assimilation of many other cultural gestures.

The basic sounds and gestures of our species have their origin in the early stages of development of the human being. Crying is not only the first sign we give of our state of mind, but also the most fundamental one, shared with thousands of other species.

There are certain expressions and standards that vary according to the culture, which are learned during the years of early childhood. These standards prescribe what should be done in response to the manifestation of each sensation or feeling in the different social environments. They vary according to social roles and demographic characteristics, and they differ from one culture to another.

We have to admit that, at the best of times, all social gatherings are a little frightening. We do not know how the other individual will behave at the moment of meeting. Smiles and laughter demonstrate the existence of this fear and they are combined with feelings of attraction and acceptance. If a person we greet does not smile frankly, and evades our eyes, this can mean one of two things: either we do not interest him or her; or he/she is an extremely shy, retiring person, and finds the situation frightening.

Each movement or position of the body has adaptive, expressive, and defensive functions – some conscious and other unconscious. Our body language can be partly instinctive, partly taught, and partly imitative, so a person's culture is an important factor to bear in mind.

Territorial needs

The space surrounding a person is another important factor in the expression of body language. Each person has a well-defined bodily space, a territory, a personal space known as the *body buffer zone*. That zone is determined personally and conditioned by the culture.

It is not known exactly how much space each person needs, since it is a kind of aura that expands and contracts constantly as we approach other people or move away from them. The important thing is to be aware how essential this personal space is and respect it; we must also be aware of what happens to an individual when his or her territory is threatened or invaded.

The following points must be borne in mind:

- Introverts tend to keep a greater distance during conversation than extroverts. A person who moves away during a conversation is showing his need to set up greater defenses to ensure his personal space.
- During a multitudinous rally or protest march, however crowded it is each person tries to keep an inviolable area around him or herself.

Hall has subdivided the territorial needs of the individual into four zones: intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance. The distances grow as the intimacy decreases.

For example, for Americans, the intimate distance can be *close*, that is in actual contact, or *far* from 15 to 45 cm. The close phase of intimate distance is for lovemaking, being with very intimate friends, and children holding hands with their parents or with other children.

At the *close intimate* distance, one is fully conscious of the person one is with. The *far* phase of the *intimate* distance is still near enough to hold hands.

The *close personal* distance is 45-75 cm, and the *far personal* phase is 75-120 cm (considered the limit of physical dominance). It is no longer possible to touch the other person comfortably from that distance, which gives a certain amount of privacy to any meeting, but the distance is close enough to hold a fairly personal conversation.

Masking

There are many methods for defending our personal zones; one of them is by masking. Masking means controlling our body so that it will not give out messages that the mind wants to hide. Masking includes facial gestures and can involve the whole body. However, it is not possible to hide involuntary reactions such as perspiration.

Masking is partly learned or absorbed from one's own culture, but another part is specifically taught, such as rules of etiquette, many of which deal with what is appropriate or inappropriate in terms of body language.

Masking increases as a child approaches adulthood. The masks harden, they become repressive, and are transformed into elements of protection. The adult may be aware of the fact that although the mask protects his intimacy and enables him to avoid associating with someone he doesn't want to be with, it can also restrict or prevent other contacts that he does want to establish. In some cases, the need to put on a mask is so deep that it imposes itself automatically and it is impossible to let go of it, but if the person is determined to grow, develop, and enter into significant relationships, he will have to start discarding his masks. As the years pass, the masks we use become more difficult to wear. An old man tends to forget about himself and his face relaxes.

A smile is not merely an expression of humor or pleasure, but it can also signify justification, defense, and even an excuse. When the smile is forced, it becomes a mask to hide feelings.

Postures and positions

*There is no word as clear as body language,
once one has learned to read it.*

Psychological attitudes are said to affect the posture and the functioning of the body, in such a way that neurotic problems also become apparent in the body's structure and function. If body language reveals an individual's state of mind, personality and ability to establish contact with others, it should be possible for the individual to

change by modifying his body language. The important thing is to understand the message he is trying to transmit and what he is really saying with the different parts of his body.

A person who knows about body language and how to use it has learned to master the most important postures and can associate them with emotional states. Such a person will be more perceptive when dealing with others. It is an art that can be taught, since it depends on careful observation, but it is only learned if one is aware that it exists.

Remember that:

- A round-shouldered person cannot have the strong ego of a person who keeps his back straight; on the other hand, a straight-backed person will be less flexible.
- Hunched shoulders mean contained annoyance; raised shoulders are associated with fear; wide, straight shoulders denote assuming responsibilities; drooping shoulders have the connotation of carrying a heavy burden.

Movements of the head, eyelids, and hands do not represent different postures but they are called *points*. A sequence of several points is qualified as a ***position***, which involves at least half of the body and can last almost five minutes.

Bear in mind that:

- When holding a conversation, people use certain head movements to indicate that they have come to the end of a sentence and are waiting for the other person's answer.
- When talking, men and women normally look right and left, up and down; they blink; they raise their eyebrows; bite their lips; touch their nose. Each movement is linked to what they are saying. Just as lowering the head indicates the end of a statement or raising the head the end of a question, major modifications in posture indicate ending points in interpretations.

Posture is not only a means of punctuating conversation, it is also the way in which people relate to each other when they are together. Three types of postures are distinguished:

- inclusive or non inclusive
- face-to-face or parallel
- congruent or incongruent.

Inclusive or non inclusive

Inclusivity or non-inclusivity refers to the way in which the members of a group include people or fail to include them. They do it by positioning their bodies, arms, or legs in a certain way. The arms and legs of the members of the group are unconsciously used to protect the group from intrusion.

Face-to-face or parallel

The second category assumes that two persons can relate with each other in terms of posture, face-to-face, sitting beside each, other or maybe facing toward a third person. The face-to-face position is usual in a teacher-student relationship or a doctor-patient relationship where emotions or information are being transmitted. Parallel positions occur, for example, among two or more students listening to a teacher. Parallel arrangements, when freely adopted, indicate that those persons are probably in a neutral situation, at least at that moment.

The way a couple position themselves in a social gathering also says a great deal about their relationship.

Congruent or incongruent

This category refers to the ability of the members of a group to imitate each other. When a group is in congruence, the positions of their bodies mimic each other, in some cases like mirror images.

Interestingly, when one member of a congruent group changes his position, everyone does so with him. The congruence of position of a group usually indicates that all the members are in agreement. If the group has two points of view, the defenders of each opinion will adopt different positions; each subgroup will be congruent within itself, but not congruent with the other subgroup. The leader in any social or family gathering often selects the position for the group and they all invariably follow him or her.

The parts of the body and body language

The different parts of the body constantly communicate people's state of mind, personality, and attitude. For example, the dominant person plants his feet squarely on the ground, adopts a firm posture, and sometimes uses bullying tactics, all of which expresses control over his affairs and responsibility for them. On the other hand, the use of too many body movements without any real significance is associated with immature personalities.

The following paragraphs summarize what can be expressed by different parts of the body, such as the hands or the face, and associated aspects, such as clothing and timing.

The hands

Hands have a very important role to play in communications. Their movement is closely associated with the emotions. When a person wants to emphasize or stress his words, he makes his hand movements bigger and more deliberate.

Bear in mind that:

- In Latin countries, every statement is accompanied by ample movements of the arms and hands, unlike Saxon countries where people make more limited movements.
- If we observe a young man waiting for his fiancée, we can perceive whether he is anxious, grieved, fearful or confident by the way he moves, joins his hands, or keeps them close to his body. We can even glimpse what he expects from that encounter.

Hand movements are more frequent when a person is having difficulty expressing his ideas verbally or when it is difficult for him to make himself understood. The greater his need to make himself understood, the greater intensity he will give to the expression of his hands and he will gesticulate more amply.

Interest or concern about an issue can be hinted at by touching the forearm of the other person. Also, with a handshake in certain situations it is possible to reveal and capture the most varied feelings of strength or weakness, attitudes of superiority or inferiority, enthusiasm or coldness, interest or lack of interest, confidence or insecurity, fear, or anxiety.

Remember that:

- When expressing condolences, we often do this with a warm handshake and a gentle hug; sorrow is transmitted in this way more naturally and effectively than with words.
- The greeting that follows visual contact is a demonstration of dominance. If we shake hands firmly and enthusiastically, we are giving the message that we possess sufficient strength and amiability to control the situation. On the other hand, a weak handshake suggests the kind of person who prefers to keep his distance and reserve his social space, someone who is enclosed within himself.

The eyes

Of all the parts of the human body used to transmit information, the eyes are the most capable of reflecting very fine nuances. The first contact we make with a person is

usually through the eyes; and one look is often enough to start or end a relationship, to choose or reject a person.

The eye muscles are so wonderfully subtle that one look can differ minutely from another; and tell us what is going on inside the person who is looking. Also, communication with one's eyes is more revealing when it is done unconsciously.

There are different formulae for exchanging looks, depending on where the meeting occurs. Sometimes we use the technique of looking-and-looking-away-again when we meet famous people. We want to reassure them that we respect their privacy. The same is true when we meet handicapped people or invalids: we look at them briefly and then look away to make sure they don't think we are staring at them. In fact, this is the technique we use in any unusual circumstance, when a stare would produce discomfort.

A subtle measurement of time is used when talking, listening, looking, and looking away. Most people look away immediately before or after having pronounced one of each four sentences. Some do so at the beginning or half-way through the sentence. When they finish speaking, half of the people look at the person they are talking to. To look away during a conversation can be a means of hiding something. We must remember, however, that the context determines the meaning of people's looks.

Visual contact can also modify a relationship. We feel how important the look is when a person refuses to look us in the eye and we cannot perceive whether we interest that person or whether the message we want to transmit is of interest to him or her.

Bear in mind that:

- If we catch someone looking at us, we feel uncomfortable as if there were something wrong. We feel disturbed and annoyed.
- Looking away is associated with the intention to hide the intensity of an emotion or a feeling.
- An absence of visual contact sometimes gives the impression of isolation.
- Strong displeasure is communicated by deliberately avoiding the eyes of the other person or by giving him/her a hard, intense look.

The face

The expression on a person's face can make a significant difference to the meaning of a message. If we want to send a warm or positive message, we back it up with a friendly smile. If it is a serious message, we show a serious, solemn or cautious expression.

With facial movements we can express a whole range of emotions, from the deepest to the most superficial. If something is bothering us, our annoyance is reflected in a hard or angry facial expression. Happiness is expressed with a change of gesture and with a soft mobility of the facial muscles. An angry person's facial muscles are tense and rigid.

This aspect of body language is very important because our face reveals our thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and our attitudes to people, ideas, or facts. Many people interpret or judge us from our facial expressions.

The human face has a tremendous variety of expressions. If we consider the head as well as the face, we find another whole set of movements. You can nod your head, shake it, turn it away, and raise it sharply; all these movements are significant. However they have different meanings when combined with different facial expressions and in different cultural contexts. The knowledge that people raise their eyebrows or lower their eyelids to express a specific emotion is the result of observation.

The arms and legs

We should not read a meaning into the way a person crosses his/her arms and legs, without first taking into account the physiological condition of the person's body. Nevertheless, there is a strong tendency to attribute a series of meanings to the direction in which we cross our arms.

It has apparently been established that crossing one's arms is sometimes a defensive gesture, a sign that one does not accept the point of view of another person, or a lack of security. These and other interpretations are valid, but when we come to the direction of the crossing of arms – left over right, or vice-versa – we are on shakier ground. The difficulty here is that the way we cross our arms is an innate genetic trait, like being right-handed or left-handed.

Prejudices

In daily social interactions, "perceptive selectivity" is expressed in a great many attitudes. This typically means that we perceive the negative aspects of individuals for whom we feel aversion, while we perceive the favorable aspects of those who attract us.

This selective attitude is also clearly manifested in prejudices. Those who prejudge specific social groups observe only those manifestations that agree with their distorted viewpoint and remove from their awareness anything that may run counter to their appraisal.

Body language plays a significant role in selective perception, since all the acts a person performs in our sight will be modified by the opinion we have formed of him, without even knowing him.

Articles and clothing

The articles people use or have around them reveal things about them. The choice of clothes and accessories tell us about the preferences, the personality, the activities and status of the people wearing them. It is also true that the interpretation of such choices reveals aspects of the personality of the perceiver.

The way we handle objects when we communicate becomes a body language message: how we fidget with a pen, the telephone wire, a salt shaker, a ring, etc. This fidgeting with objects can express nervousness, boredom, lack of interest, anxiety, or other emotions.

Here again we see the need to manage an image in keeping with each personality and the need to make sure that the message we send to individuals or groups is a positive one, so that the response we elicit from them will be equally effective.

Timing

Timing is another element in non-verbal communication. A person's use of time hints at his or her interests, habits and motivations, and says a lot about that person's self-control in specific situations.

If somebody always arrives at his workplace in good time, he is demonstrating interest, responsibility, and companionship. If he is one of those people who arrive late every day, this reveals irresponsibility, bad habits, lack of respect toward his work colleagues, low personal ambition, or excessive self-esteem.

If the time he spends at work explaining a process, giving indications to a colleague or new instructions to a subordinate is adequate, this shows the kind of person he is and the good relationships and positive attitudes he is aiming for. If, on the contrary, he does things hastily and tries to finish as soon as possible, this suggests that he has little interest and more than a little selfishness. The disinterested use of time is always admired by everyone.

Different gestures and their possible interpretation¹	
Gesture	Interpretation
Women	
Play with hair	Flirting
Fidget with a necklace or chain	Flirting
Fidget with earring, or touch one's earlobe	Flirting
Swing hips and upper body	Flirting
Hand on hip	Flirting
Cross legs	Defense
Rest ankle of one leg on the other knee	Independence
Men	
Arrange tie	Flirting
Pull socks up	Flirting
Rub or pull on earlobe	Flirting
Arrange belt	Display of virility
Both	
Play with button (shirt or blouse)	Flirting
Hold eye contact	Interest or insistent curiosity
Show the palms of the hands	Inviting trust
Cover one's mouth with a hand while talking	Uncertainty of what one is saying; or lying
Hands on waist	Challenge
Eyes up and to the right	Imagination
Eyes down and to the left	Searching one's memory
Evading eye contact when talking	Not wanting to show one's feeling; or lying
Strong handshake	Wanting to show dominance
Weak handshake	Insecurity or fear
Stiffness in the body	Stiff personality or difficulty in showing emotions
Drooping shoulders	Emotional burden
Head to one side when listening	Attention
Arms folded in barrier posture: In front of the body At the back	Calm or reserve Fear or insecurity
Rocking or swaying from one foot to another when in a group	Anxiety or insecurity
Eyebrows raised	Arrogance or incredulity
Ample gestures with arms	Self-confidence or generosity
Lips: Closed without tension Closed tight Biting one's lips	Open, willing posture Decision, aggression, or concentration Nervousness, reflection, or hesitation
Head thrust forward	Aggression

¹ It is important to note that each gesture should always be interpreted in the particular context in which the person is. It can happen that the meaning is other than that mentioned here. All the body signals should be added to obtain a correct total if we are to interpret body language integrally.

Recommendations

The following recommendations about body language may be very helpful in your communication processes. Pay attention, and good luck!

- a. The greeting: get off to a good start.

It is good to show an open attitude with your body. Since this is the first contact signal, it is important to be aware of your posture. An immediate sign of openness is to have your chest pointing at the person you are meeting or whom you are interested in addressing (*heart-to-heart* posture).

The second step is eye contact. Be the first to offer it with a direct look into the person's eyes (real contact). Be the first to smile, too. This is a good way to get the other person's attention.

A verbal greeting is the next step; the phrase used will depend on the formality of the situation ("*Hi*", "*Good afternoon*") and it will also depend on local customs.

To bring this first approach to an end, you will then need to introduce yourself; next comes synchronization with the body language of the other person; and this, in turn, is the step that will lead to an immediate connection.

- b. Avoid blinking constantly – this betrays hesitation and insecurity.
- c. Try to keep your look direct at all times, and establish eye contact with the other people; this reveals sincerity and decision.
- d. Do not bite your lips or wet them with your tongue, because these are signs of shyness, insecurity, hesitation, and indecision.
- e. Keep your mouth shut and lips together all the time you are listening to the other person. This shows that you are calm and self-confident. An open mouth and sagging jaw suggest nervousness, haste, astonishment or surprise.
- f. Always keep an appropriate posture and avoid constant sudden movements; these denote discomfort, nervousness, fear, and lack of control.
- g. Stay alert but inexpressive while others are talking to you. Avoid making movements with your body at a phrase that surprises you or with which you do not agree. Make your opinion known at the right time, not before.
- h. Control your hand movements; keep your hands visible.

- i. You should speak in a moderate tone of voice, without hesitation. A hesitant voice transmits insecurity and shyness. It usually reveals that the person does not master the topic he is talking about or that his concepts are not firm or well defined. If you deliberately lower the tone of your voice to make the auditorium pay attention, you are being manipulative and showing superiority.
- j. When speaking, always keep control of yourself, even if you are involved in an intense discussion or argument.
- k. If you want to gain the confidence of the auditorium you are addressing, do not allow any object to come between you, for example, a desk.
- l. Try to identify with your auditorium; adapt your clothing to the social and economic characteristics of the locality (for example, if you go to a poor community, you should not go in formal clothing).
- m. Find out about the cultural characteristics of the community you are going to, in order to avoid embarrassing situations (if you are a man, for example, you must be aware of the correct way to address married women).
- n. Remember not to cross your arms over your chest because this is a definite defense posture or one of rejection.
- o. Do not cover your mouth with your hands while you are talking; this shows that you are not telling the truth or that you feel insecure.
- p. Try to have a relaxed posture.

References

- (1) Davis F. *La comunicación no verbal*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial. 1987.
- (2) Fast J. *El lenguaje del cuerpo*. Barcelona: Kairós. 1994.
- (3) Kristus M. *El lenguaje secreto de su cuerpo ¿Qué revela?* Panamá: América. 1990.
- (4) Swanson RM. *Los mensajes secretos del cuerpo*. México, DF: Leo. 1994.
- (5) Brulard M. *Gestos para seducir. El lenguaje del cuerpo para la seducción y el amor*. Madrid: EDAF. 1996.
- (6) Rebel. G. *Body language*. Madrid: EDAF. 1995.
- (7) Boothman, N. *How to make people like you in 90 seconds or less*. New York: Workman Publishing. 2000.